THE BLESSEDNESS OF BEING POOR
Matthew 5:1-3 Ephesians 6:10-18
March 10, 1968

"The smells inside the tenement - Number 18, 342 East 100th Street, Manhattan, were .... ambiguous. They were a suffocating mixture of rotting food, rancid mattresses, dead rodents, dirt, and the stale odors of human life.

"This was to be home. It had been home before: for a family of eight - five kids, three adults. Some of their belongings had been left behind. Some of their life had, too.

"The place altogether was about 25 x 12 feet, with a wall separating the kitchen sections from the rest. In the kitchen was a bathtub, a tiny, rusty sink, a refrigerator that didn't work, and an ancient gas range. In one corner (of the kitchen) was a toilet with a bowl without a seat. Water dripped perpetually from the box above the bowl. The other room was filled with beds: two double-decker military cots, and a big, ugly convertible sofa. There wasn't room for anything else. The walls and ceilings were mostly holes and patches and peeling paint, sheltering legions of cock-roaches.

"This was to be my home.

"I wondered for a moment, why.

"Then I remembered that this is the sort of place in which most people live, in most of the world, for most of the time. This or something worse.

"Then I was home."

(William Stringfellow, My People Is the Enemy, p. 2)

That is the prologue to Wm. Stringfellow's autobiography, My People Is the Enemy: it puts flesh and blood into the word "poverty": and however you respond to these words, and the reality they describe, there is one position that rudimentary human decency eliminates. That is that poverty - this poverty - is "blessed".

Poverty has been romanticized in literature. John Bunyon, in Pilgrim's Progress, portrayed the poor man as a careful, simple, happy individual, grateful for his meagre belongings. That may have been true: that may have been true in this country in the past. But it is not true today. Poverty is a domonic, dehumanizing, destructive force, amplified by the visible affluence of our culture. Whatever poverty used to be, today it is bad. It is, without any doubt, the most serious threat to the fiber and being of our nation. Poverty, regardless of the wars declared upon it, looms as the strongest enemy the American people have ever faced. It is, in no sense, blessed to be poor.

Yet we have before us, for our consideration, the first beatitude. In Luke it reads simply: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God." And Matthew - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." It is of some interest that the orthodox Marxist always refer s to the first beatitude to reinforce his position that religion is the "opiate of the masses". The Marxist sees here an emphasis on an other-worldly kingdom that anesthetizes men from their very worldly problems. Of course, that is a ridiculous conclusion if one takes at all seriously the total life and ministry of Jesus Christ. That, however, is the job of the Christian and not the Marxist, and we might begin by puncturing the fantasy that Jesus glamourized and romanticized the life of poverty.

Now having said that, it is necessary to acknowledge that he did, in fact, proclaim a benediction for the poor or poor in spirit; and that he did, in fact, become a friend and hero of the literally poor. That is one of the abiding, disturbing truths of the New Testament. He seems simply to have preferred the company of the poor rather than the rich. He identified with the dispossessed, not the wealthy. He made his home among the peasantry, not with the aristocrats. He was more comfortable at table with common men than at the banquet table of a Pharisee. He went out of his way to identify with the poor: he was one of them. But before we come to any conclusions from this, it is necessary to understand that when we talk about poverty and affluence in first century Palestine, we have moved into a social and economic structure entirely different from our own.

In the first century, a man was either rich or poor. If he owned property, he was rich, and a member of a very select minority.

If he owned no property, but made his living working on land which belonged to someone else, he was poor, and a member of a vast majority. In short, there was no middle class: there were only a few rich men: and multitudes of poor men.

The more important pursuit, however, is to discover what it was about these poor people that he found blessed? How was a poor man, also a "poor in spirit" man? I would suggest three possible answers.

First, and very basic, is the fact that material wealth - particularly in a situation where most people are poor - very naturally becomes the source of pride. If I am rich, and everyone else is poor, it follows logically that I've either been extremely lucky, or that I am better than everyone else. Human ego, of course, is inclined toward the latter. That is, pride is our problem, and being wealthy simply makes it easier to be proud. The people Jesus was talking about had nothing. That is, they had nothing - no reason to separate themselves from their fellows: nothing visible about which to be proud.

That is basic. A little more subtle is the fact that the poor man, by reason of his poverty, is freer than the wealthy man. The poor man is free of the social niceties, the rigid formalism, the oppressive rules of the wealthy. Jesus was a great enemy of pomposity and phoniness. He detested the way the wealthy practiced their religion, making sure all saw their piety, conspicuously giving their alms, keeping every letter of the law and in the process forgetting its intent. The rituals and liturgies of the rich can become an obsession. But the poor man - eats when he is hungry, where he is hungry. The poor man weeps when he is sad, and laughs when he is happy and curses when he is angry. And I like to feel that Jesus found that freedom "blessed".

The poor are certainly more aware of their dependence on each other than the affluent. Part of the motivation behind collecting wealth, is to achieve independence - to be dependent on no one. That, of course, is impossible, but it isn't even an option for the poor man. He is dependent, and knows it, and therefore is better able to acknowledge and express a genuine oneness with his fellows, than the man who stands alone.

I believe it is a combination of these three characteristics that found favor in Jesus' eyes. I believe that is why he could look out on a motley crowd of dispossessed poor men and say, in effect "Congratulations! God's Kingdom belongs to you."

Now, if you happen to be poor today, the first Beatitude could be the source of great comfort. If you happen to be poor you can be comforted by the fact that Jesus Christ became poor: that his friends were people like you: that he favored people like you over the wealthy: that he reserved a special blessing for people like you.

If you are not poor, you have a problem. And the fact is that no one here is poor, or anything close to it. I know many people who are quite proud of their pilgrimage from rags to riches, people who enjoy telling "how it used to be", and when my children express a premature wish for an expensive toy, I know I will tell them that "I never had one". In fact, I already have. But you and I have never been poor, nor are we likely ever to be poor - at least that poor. Therefore, if we want somehow to crawl under the umbrella of the first Beatitude, we have a small problem.

The temptation, of course, is to interpret the Beatitudes as ethical imperatives, which they singularly are not. Jesus did not say, "Become poor and you will then inherit the Kingdom". Nevertheless this is how the Beatitudes are commonly employed, in which case we have two options.

We can become poor. We can give away all our possesssions and assume poverty for poverty's sake. Even though Jesus did not prescribe it as the way to achieve blessedness, it would, at least, put us in the category of people he called blessed. But this is not the point: the Beatitudes were a proclamation: a statement that those who were poor were blessed, and not an ethical imperative to be obeyed. Option number one is neither valid nor realistic.

The second option is to interpret poor, or poor in spirit, as an idiom for a state of mind, having nothing to do with material possessions. What Jesus meant, then, was "Blessed are the humble-minded", and that is, in fact, the way the Greek word has

been translated by J. B. Phillips. That seems to clarify the matter a great deal. It certainly moves the discussion into an area where we can begin to cope with it. Humility is certainly easier to talk about than literal poverty. All we need to do, then, to be remembered among the blessed, is to be humble. And yet the simplicity of this is very deceiving.

Humility is a universal virtue. It is difficult to become great in any real sense without humility. But as soon as we try to become humble we find ourselves in serious trouble. T. S. Eliot put it this way: "Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to ac_eve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself." (Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca. 1927)

I believe that can be put in even stronger terms. I don't think it is possible to "achieve" humility. Because as soon as we try, as soon as we see humility as a goal to be attained, a funny thing happens.

One theologian describes it like this: "We must stop being proud and arrogant, and become humble. When we recognize this, we say to ourselves, 'We will strive with all our might to be humble.' And what happens? To the extent that we succeed, we become aware of how humble we are, and, try as we will, we are unable to avoid the conclusion that it is pretty grand of us to be so humble. We really have been very good about it - much better than a lot of people we know. God must be pleased at the splendid character of our humility.

"What has happened? We have become proud of being humble....." (Robert McAfee Brown, The Bible Speaks to You, p. 177-8) And, of course, it doesn't end there. The human ego is a marvelously flexible instrument. Recognizing that we are proud of being humble only makes matters worse. For then we are in danger of being proud of the fact that we had the depth of perception to recognize that we were being proud of being humble. And so on, ad infinitum.

The fact is that you and I cannot achieve humility in the same way we are able to achieve dexterity in a sport or a job. For as soon as we begin to achieve anything, pride becomes part of the enterprise, perhaps on a motivational level. That is the way we are. We cannot, by an act of will, become humble, or poor in spirit.

Now where does this leave us, in respect to the first Beatitude? Our options, obviously, have about run out. And it is precisely at this point, when we see at last that this is not a moral goal to be achieved; that there is absolutely nothing you and I are capable of doing to make ourselves humble, that the "Blessedness of the poor in spirit" begins to take on meaning. It is at this point, after we have been pushed to the brink of despair about our inability to do anything about our condition - anything to propel ourselves within the blessing of Jesus Christ- that the Gospel comes into focus.

Who were the people he called blessed? Whatever else they were, they had become his followers. And one does not follow him far without becoming "poor-in-spirit". It happens; in spite of ourselves; in spite of our desire to think highly of ourselves; in spite of our subtle tendency to feel proud about not feeling proud.

To follow Jesus Christ is to be reminded, perhaps very harshly, that there is no such thing as a "self-made man"; that we are dependent on each other: that regardless of what we have achieved on the basis of our own strengths, we are only what others have helped to make us. To follow Jesus Christ very far, is to be brought face to face with the God who created us, whose air we breathe, in whose world we walk, and whose very life has become our life. To follow Jesus Christ very far is to see on the horizon the silhouette of a cross on which he died. The more we follow - the closer we come to that - to that shattering moment of truth when everything we have - everything we are-becomes nothing, but everything, because it was for us he died.

To follow Jesus Christ is to be "poor in spirit".

The first New Testament reading this morning, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, admonished the man of faith to "be strong; to put on the whole armor of God; to take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit." That seems contrary to everything we have been saying - but it is not. The life of discipleship is a struggle: it is a "race to be run and a battle to be won." It demands men of great strength and conviction. To be "poor in spirit" is not to be weak; it is not to be neutral, or noncommittal. Nothing could be further from the truth.

But it begins with an act of surrender. The life of discipleship begins in what one man has called a "Magnificent Defeat". It begins when, for the sake of Jesus Christ, - not for the sake of humility, not for the sake of our own ego-gratification, but for his sake - we become followers. In that act of becoming, in that act of surrender - his words fall on us:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven".

Amen.